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West Contra Costa school board cuts 138 positions

By Shelly Meron
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The West Contra Costa school board has voted to eliminate 138 positions, preparing for the possibility of more state education budget cuts.

"Our statutory duty is to stay solvent. I think this is responsible," said board President Charles Ramsey. "The reality is, we have done a lot better than neighboring districts."

The district's staff is planning next year's budget with the assumption that they will need to cut \$11.6 million. The layoffs save \$1.38 million.

State law requires that school districts notify teachers and other certificated staff of layoffs by March 15, even though districts don't pass budgets until June, and the state typically has no final budget for months after that.

If the Legislature puts tax extensions on the June ballot and voters approve them, district officials believe the deficit will shrink to \$2.6 million, and some or all of the employees affected could be rehired.

This week's layoffs included 26 jobs in kindergarten through sixth grade, 32.6 positions in seventh through 12th grade, 39 districtwide jobs and 41 administrative positions. Eliminated jobs included teachers in various subjects, counselors, literacy

coaches and assistant principals.

Board member Elaine Merriweather suggested the district use some of its reserve money to save jobs and programs next year. By law, the district must maintain a reserve of 3 percent, and Merriweather said anything above that could be used to lessen the

cuts.

"Many teachers have sacrificed a lot already," she said. "They've suffered enough."

The layoffs were approved by a 3-2 vote, with board members Merriweather and Tony Thurmond voting no.

After extensive discussions of budget priorities in recent weeks, district staffers brought back ideas Wednesday night on how to eliminate the shortfall.

Aside from staff reductions, the plan would include using \$4.8 million in one-time, federal money; cutting \$1 million from the adult education program and \$1 million from school resource officer contracts; and reducing debt. The district would keep some level of class size reduction, in part by using Title I money at schools with a high percentage of low-income students.

More than 200 adult education students, teachers and supporters turned out to the board meeting Wednesday, waving signs and speaking about the importance of English as a second language and U. S. citizenship classes, and programs for seniors and the disabled. Adult education teacher Kristen Pursley told the board they were "following a sorry and shameful example" of other districts by cutting the program and "balancing the budget on the backs of poor people."

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Meanwhile, Pinole resident Tammy Campbell urged the board to find the money for school resource officers, saying they are crucial in keeping campuses safe.

The district will have an interim budget report March 16 and may consider more cuts in April.

More details about the district's finances are online at [www.wccusd.net/Budget Information/fiscal.aspx](http://www.wccusd.net/Budget%20Information/fiscal.aspx).

Staff writer Shelly Meron covers education in West Contra Costa. Follow her at [Twitter.com/shellymeron](https://twitter.com/shellymeron), and stay up to date on West County news at IBAbuzz.com/westcounty.

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